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ABSTRACT

Based on the contention that knowledge of how and where children learn to speak is essential to the development of sound bilingual educational programs, a research project was undertaken to gain insights into how children learn oral language at school. Three bilingual and 39 nonbilingual classrooms at the preschool through the sixth grade level were observed for one complete school day, with observers concentrating on one child selected at random from the total class. Observers recorded the length of time the child was directed or induced to speak by the teacher and noted the total amount of time the child was under direct adult supervision during the day. The findings suggested the following: (1) children speak but are not required to do so by the teacher; (2) children are learning to speak outside the control of teachers; and (3) teachers do not control the oral language development of children. (FL)

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- A PILOT STUDY REPORT -

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND
THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL EXPRESSION

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FOREWORD

The Constitution of the United States left some unresolved problems when instituted. One of these, slavery, was later resolved with bloodshed of brothers. White men fought white men to rectify a wrong against Blacks. The Constitution had permitted for some institutions to be more for the benefit of some and subjugated others.

In Education, a similar problem was created when we voted for English as the national language of our country. We did not charge the public (or private) schools with teaching the new national language to the groups which did not speak it. Subsequently and consequently our schools have become institutions for the benefit of those who speak English before entering. A new type of revolution is at hand and it addresses itself to all teachers and schools of America. Teach the spoken language of our country!

INTRODUCTION

In a recent letter, in reference to the pilot study herein, Miles V. Zintz, Professor of Education at the University of New Mexico and long-time advocate of education across cultures states:

"...I suspect that we have all known for a long time that teachers spend most of their time forbidding language instead of encouraging it - but it is a shocking reality to admit that a child might sit all day at school and average no more than 40 seconds of time using (interpreting or creating) language."

Language may well be the most interesting research topic for educators. How does an infant move from "no cookie" to "I don't want the cookie?"

Rochelle Mayer notes?¹

"...How a child comes to utter such a statement is not fully understood. Direct imitation of adult speech doesn't serve as an adequate explanation, since it is unlikely that the child has heard negatives formed this way. The puzzle only deepens when one is trying to understand how a child moves...to adult speech."

One must agree that practice is a key element in the achievement of facility with all four language skills: listening/comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. It is assumed that the facility in these areas is actively promoted by teachers in school in the years the child attends. A recent experiment² suggests that whereas the first statement is true, (that practice is a key element), the second may not be. After seven years (1967-1974) of receiving instruction on alternate days in English and Spanish, a study was initiated, comparing this experimental group with a control group taught only in English during the same period and:

"...in the areas of reading, language skills and arithmetic...(in English)...It appears as though the bilingual program had essentially the same effect as the regular programs on measured academic achievement."

This suggests that as far as practice "encoding in English" both groups had equivalent amounts of practice and, therefore, achieved comparable facility. The author wondered why the student who spent a large

part of their time in Spanish did not drop below the level of those who spent the entire class time in English. This report deals with a pilot research project to gain insights into how children learn oral language at school.

The knowledge of how and where children learn to speak is essential to the development of sound bilingual programs. Few, if any, studies reflect the conceptualization of language practice as an objective for early elementary school grades. Bilingual education researchers³ go as far as stating that:

"...none of the studies they were able to include in their survey addressed the question of how being bilingual affects a child's oral language development. This is a very important concern, because it is in the growth of a spoken language that the child struggles with giving expression and communicable form to any experience."

There is no evidence nor studies that provide us with evidence, to show that "bilingual education" programs differ significantly in oral encoding intensity.

To evaluate oral language learning in school one must be able to measure the required exposure intensity. The intensity (time) of directed encoding practice in our classrooms is not known.

THE PILOT STUDY

In the pilot study four hypotheses were made:

1. Children speak but are not required to do so by the teacher.
2. Teachers do not require children to encode their ideas orally in large measure.
3. Children are learning to speak outside the control of the teachers.
4. Teachers do not control the oral language development of children

PROCEDURES

Forty-two upper division and graduate students from CSUF spent one complete school day in 39 nonbilingual and 3 bilingual classrooms observing one child selected at random from the total class enrollment. The schools were mainly average (national percentile/CTBS scores) schools and, whenever possible, nonbilingual-program schools. The observers were instructed to record the length of time the child was directed or induced to encode orally by the teacher, paraprofessional, or other adult in the room. "Encoding" included asking questions of the teacher, paraprofessional, or other adult; responses to questions by these adults, as well as the relaying of information. Reading aloud was not included (...The grammatical encoding in reading is already done and often the children in the class do not rely on the oral-aural transmission for comprehension. Reading aloud of material which needed decoding by others, however, was included (plays, games, etc.)). Choral work was not included as the comprehension of the individual's message is not needed, nor does he or she need to encode for comprehension by others. Since the observer watched him all day, the total time that the child was under direct adult supervision was also reported.

RESULTS

Data supported hypotheses 1, 3, and 4.

Hypotheses #2 was supported insofar as the study demonstrated that the median time for oral encoding by a child was 39 seconds compared to an average teacher-supervised day of 13,835 seconds in classrooms varying from "preschool" through sixth grade. No evidence of any grade-level variables was found, however, the size of the sample, by grade, was small. It is evident from these reports, however, that these "educators-in-training" (upper

classmen and graduate, including teachers) were excited about the unique opportunity to observe one child all day. They spoke of having had a great experience. Excerpts from student observer reports demonstrate the feelings expressed in written as well as oral reports:

"...after my observation, I became keenly aware of the fact that it is very possible, even probable, that many students can and do "get by" without having to orally transmit information to anyone during a routine school day..."

"...I, for one, am trying to let the children express themselves more, verbally, than ever, after my observation..."

"...pointed out to me things that I myself am doing and made it clearer that there are certain things that I could do better..."

"...2 minutes 30 seconds, out of a five hour school day. That is rather a jolt to me, when I think about it..."

"...it was hard for me to believe that less than one minute was transmitted by students..."

ANALYSES

The observers received little training, therefore, their reports varied but some basic information can be gleaned:

Length of day observed		
Mean ($\bar{X}$)		13,385 seconds
Median		13,800 seconds
Range		7,500-20,000 seconds
Number		38*
Length of adult controlled encoding		
Mean ($\bar{X}$)		70 seconds
Median		39 seconds**
Range		0-405 seconds
Number		41*
Observations (Man-day):	Number	Grade
	1	Preschool
	9	K
	11	1
	7	2
	3	3
	4	4
	5	5
	1	6
	41	Total observations

*The variance between 42 (students) and these numbers is accounted for by uncertain information reports which could not be validly interpreted.

**39 seconds is the more realistic central-tendency measure because a couple of high scores which "pull" the $\bar{X}$ up.

The directions to the students were brief:

1. Be at the site all day.
2. Record the number of minutes the students are under the supervision of the teacher, (classroom time).
3. Choose a child at random to observe, (the teacher should not know which child you choose).
4. Observe the child only when under the direction of his teacher or teachers.
5. Time (stopwatch) all instances when the child transmits information orally under teacher directions.
 - a) Talks to adult in charge
 - b) Relays or conveys a message
 - c) Answers or asks a question
6. Do not time instances when reception (comprehension) is not required or when the student is not directed by the teacher.
 - a) Reading aloud (all from same text)
 - b) Singing
 - c) Talk with other students not directed by the teacher

Write a report which includes your name, the grade level observed, the school and a candid set of notes based on your observation, including the total "transmission time" and total "class time".

ADDITIONAL INTERESTING QUOTES FROM THE REPORTS

"...Tony was constantly out of his seat to talk to friends or just walk around..."

"...consisting mostly of short phrases..."

"...turned out to be one of the more verbal students in the classroom..."

"...The teacher prized a quiet, industrious room..."

"...One-word responses were much more abundant than we had anticipated and they were difficult to time..."

"...observed a regular nonbilingual first grade. The ethnic makeup, however, was 100 percent Mexican-American..."

"...She told me that there wasn't time because of all the other things that had to be done..."

"...All the children had something to say about the picture and the teacher made it easier by telling about some personal experiences having to do with the pictures."

"...We expect to teach language to children and we ask questions that only need a yes or no answer..."

"...my observee, didn't say a word, neither did very many other children, at least as directed by the teacher..."

"...The teacher of this class followed a very traditional instructional design. The students were expected to remain very quiet at all times. They were expected to speak only when addressed individually by the teacher or when they had questions and asked on their own initiative."

"...Most of his communication was nonverbal..."

"...There was very little verbal communication between students and teacher..."

"...If the children would talk too much, points would be taken off for that group. So the children tried to be quiet as possible..."

"...Repeatedly the children were told to quietly sit down and put their heads on the table..."

"...Following the film three questions were asked to the entire group..."

"...In the room I observed there was hardly ever a chance set up by the teacher for the children to respond with any more than a yes/no..."

"...By observing a child in a nonbilingual program where the scores were higher, we attempt to find out if higher language scores are the result of more oral language practice..."

"...First, this school had fairly good language scores, and next, (this) is a Renaissance school with a "back-to-the-basics" policy..."

"...For many children, increased oral language transmission in the classroom under teacher supervision may be the answer, but this is not the case in the fifth grade class observed..."

"...It's shocking!..."

"...there were also some children who did not speak at all..."

"...situations needed only one-word responses..."

"...It was most revealing to me to learn how little time is spent in actual verbalization by students daily..."

"...the premium placed on speaking only when called upon..."

"...all (questions) of which could be answered by a one word statement..."

"...I was impressed during my observation by the teacher's insistence on good listening..."

OBSERVATIONS

This brief pilot study appears to strongly support the author's belief that teaching methods need to, and can, accommodate increased opportunities for oral expression practice for the child from linguistically limited environments and/or linguistically different groups.

Early school experiences for children should include intensive oral encoding practice. Current assessment procedures often ignore the absence of this practice thereby indicating lower achievement and prognosis for slow learning. The ignoring of this causal factor in making prognoses for slow progress may be at the root of problems encountered by programs aimed at teaching English to the socially, culturally, or linguistically different child.

A more thoroughly controlled study is needed to include variables excluded here, but which may shed light on causal items. Teacher preparation, type of classroom, student-teacher ratio, grade level relationship, may all be interesting indicators leading to new and different methodologies.

Intensive, directed or induced, oral encoding practice methodologies can be designed to integrate the abilities of all children including the gifted, the "average", the bilingual and the linguistically low-scoring student.

INCREASED STUDENT ORAL-ENCODING SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOMS

Good classroom teaching skills require a variety of ways to promote strong development of language skills. Some suggestions include the following:

1. Children respond better when questioned by a person to whom their information is new. The discussion and question/answer period after a story told or read by the teacher can be stimulated in quality (completeness of utterances) and quantity (number of utterances) if conducted by a person who was not present during the activity. For example the "person" posing the questions may include: (a) a puppet who "sleep" during the story...(b) a paraprofessional or a parent out of the room during the story...(c) another teacher who exchanges places with the team mate...(d) aide who tells a different story to part of the class and exchanges with the teacher...(e) a group of two or three students who come in to the room and are then told the story by the group.
2. "Paired" work where: (a) The work of one student is communicated to another who in turn is responsible to the teacher. This permits the teacher to view the results of his or her teaching and the development of communicative skills. (b) Science experiments are viewed by one student, communicated to a "partner" who is responsible for replicating the experiment. (c) Book reports are "told" to the partner before attempting to write them. (d) Movies (also slide or filmstrip audiovisual presentations) are reviewed by the partners without the soundtrack. (e) Classes are divided during art activities and brief visitations are structured to explain or "show-and-tell" about each other's work, etc.

3. "Show and Tell" with all the variations at different age levels such as "mystery brown bags," "situational pictures," "items from home," "peep boxes" etc....can be made into highly intensive encoding experience when children are instructed to tell another student what they are going to tell the class as a whole during their turn.

There is an endless number of activities which lead to the transmission of what was learned and may well effect measurable change in language encoding ability for the children with whom we work in our schools. Continuing the old ways will not yield the progress we seek and promises made for the 1980's for the children who are linguistically different.

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